



FALL 2006

Roca: A Study in Innovation

When you enter the building of Roca, a youth development organization in Chelsea, Massachusetts, your senses come to life. Young people are sitting at the front desk, dancing in the adjacent studio, walking around with notebooks, talking to youth workers...there is a palpable sense that the youth are comfortable here, and that they have the space and resources to make positive changes.

At Roca, relationships between youth and adults are intentional – in fact, one of the organizational mantras is “we’re running relationships, not programs.” Drawing on its eighteen year history, staff has developed effective strategies for reaching vulnerable youth and functioning in a community responsibly. Many of the lessons they have learned at Roca have groundbreaking implications for the field.



In the past couple of years, the Innovation Center has partnered with Roca to surface and document a number of these practices, as well as provide tools and technical assistance. Two of the most exciting elements of Roca’s work that the Innovation Center staff has investigated and researched are the *Engaged Institutions Strategy* and *transformational relationships*.

Realizing that development occurs not only in individuals, but also in the organizations that affect young people’s lives, Roca engages not only youth but the institutions that serve them. The *Engaged Institutions Strategy* is an effective and holistic approach to connecting and building relationships with these other organizations in order to address the multiple needs of youth in crisis and enhance opportunities for their growth and

development. To accomplish this, meetings are scheduled weekly and bi-weekly with the Department of Social Services, probation and the police department, the Department of Youth Services, and the Chelsea school system. Representatives from these organizations talk about young adults who are shared between the agencies and ensure smooth intake of new participants. Roca has a working relationship with the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) and facilitates a specialized programming component for young parents.

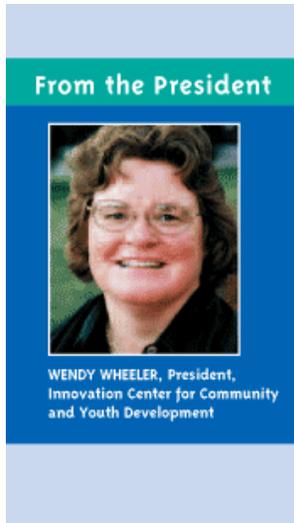
Roca also facilitates a weekly group with inmates at the Suffolk County House of Correction and is working with the assistant deputy Superintendent to develop a re-entry process for young men and women returning to the community, taking lessons they have learned while incarcerated and using them for the greater good of their neighborhood. This work is literally about Roca building intensive relationships with individuals as well as leadership in organizations and institutions so that Roca and the organizations can hold each other accountable for the support and services they young people need. The Engaged Institutions Strategy is Roca's most successful community building strategy to date. The focus of the work is always on the young people and helping them to establish structures and systems that they can benefit from the most.

Transformational relationships enable Roca staff to launch young people on the road to a healthy and sustainable future. The interpersonal relationships between staff members of Roca and each young person serve as vehicles for creating opportunities and making paths for each person to undertake his or her own change. In these relationships staff members push, pull, persuade, educate, support, stand beside and consistently show up so as to help the young person to learn to act in his or her own best interest. Roca staff members show up at all times of the day and night wherever youth might be- in their homes, wherever they hang out on the streets, in court, or at school. After a very intentional process of building trust with the youth, the staff person will start to suggest and push for positive changes and responsible behavior and will literally not give up.

These intentional processes are carefully tracked, monitored, and, to the extent possible, planned. Staff members at Roca have ongoing check-ins and supervision regarding the status of relationships, and they are documented on a computer database in a manner that is transparent and accessible to other staff. The outcomes of this work are taken very seriously. Said one youth worker, "If I am not in the top three when [the youth] are asked to identify the nine most helpful people they know, I know something is wrong."

For young people in crisis, transformational relationships catalyze a learning process that creates opportunities for relationships with caring adults, building readiness for change, peer group support, opportunities for educational achievement, employment, and meaningful engagement in community and civic life. While providing for the development of a range of basic human skills (including empowerment, self determination, hygiene, responsibility, accountability and personal change), Roca's transformational relationships engage young people in a structured learning process of personal growth, education, and employment readiness. This provides a foundation that heals and motivates young people in crisis to live life out of harm's way and thrive.

From the President



Welcome to *Innovate*, the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development's quarterly newsletter highlighting promising practices in youth and community development.

This issue of *Innovate* focuses on adding value to the field of community and youth development. Community based programs do vital work in all sorts of challenging situations. Often, they find creative—even groundbreaking—ways to manage their daily work. By building connections among the people, ideas and actions of these groups, we can add value to their work and to the entire field. To do this, we need to look at who we are, what kinds of spaces we create, and how we build partnerships with both organizations and young people.

The first tool we bring to youth work is who we are - our thoughts, dreams, beliefs and our daily actions that contribute to our work and have a profound impact on the youth and adults in our lives. Bringing a sense of intentionality to our behavior is one of the essential yet most overlooked aspect of program improvement. We need to have the guts to show young people who we really are. It's important to ask ourselves if we are constantly seeking better practices and strengthening our efforts. Many people featured in this newsletter are doing just that. At the Innovation Center, we bring their stories to the forefront – sharing them with others to stimulate ideas and offer inspiration.

Another often-overlooked way we can add value is by creating a space that is welcoming, creative and safe. Ask yourself these questions: Which community members feel as if they have access to the space, and show up for meetings and gatherings? Do young people feel as if they can drop in, and participate in a true spirit of collaboration? The spaces we use can be offices, community centers, or even places outdoors – but we should pay some attention to both the physical and emotional role these places have in the work. The right space fosters renewed energy and fresh perspective, as well as the promise of reaching new participants.

Another way of adding value to your program is to work in partnership with other people and groups. Your ally could be the youth organization down the street, for example. By joining forces, you might provide your community with more comprehensive services and programs than either organization could alone. Often an unlikely candidate for partnering is a business. Local businesses might help with job training for young people,

provide much-needed supplies and in-kind support, or offer space from which to work. Forming relationships with a host of different people is imperative to getting the best work done.

Finally, our most undervalued resources are the young people in our communities. In this newsletter, you will hear the phenomenal stories of the work these individuals are doing. A large part of enabling young people to add value to organizations is listening to them – their concerns, passions, hopes and ambitions. The Innovation Center brings partnerships with young people to the foreground, consistently emphasizing the importance of connecting youth and adults in building better communities and creating social change. Innovation Center toolkits, resources and trainings help pose vital questions for practitioners and policymakers interested in successful youth civic engagement and leadership development. We want to hear from *you* - we look forward to your ideas and suggestions as we surface more innovative practices and stories of impact from the field.

Alaskan High School Students Build Statewide Support For Controlling Global Warming

The Innovation Center staff traveled to Alaska to train adults and youth to implement successful youth-adult partnerships. As part of a statewide “Youth in Governance” initiative, AYEA member Milly Josephson, adult volunteer advisor Claire Fordyce, and Program Manager Polly Carr attended this two- day training. In addition to promoting youth leadership through the “Youth in Governance” initiative, the AYEA program is cultivating youth voice through a number of other projects, campaigns, and trainings. This remarkable program is truly adding value to the field of youth civic engagement, yielding sensational results. The Innovation Center has been honored to be part of their success.

by Polly Carr, AYEA Program Manager



When members of Alaska Youth for Environmental Action (AYEA) decided to launch a statewide outreach and education program on global warming, they never expected that it would take them from the state capitol to the halls of Congress. This high school leadership program of the National Wildlife Federation has brought its message to communities across Alaska and to members of Congress. In the

process it has strengthened and expanded its organizational capacity.

AYEA launched the project in August 2005. During its *Summer Get Together* training, teens gathered in Homer to learn about global warming impacts in Alaska, the science behind the greenhouse effect, and how to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. At the end of the event, AYEА graduate Verner Wilson of Dillingham wrote a "Letter to our Leaders," describing the devastating impacts of global warming on Alaska and demanding national action through legislation reducing greenhouse gas emissions and investment in renewable energy.

"I started this petition to ask our leaders to help protect this place that Alaska youth have inherited, and to protect our lifestyles and cultures," said Wilson. "Communities like Shishmaref are sinking underwater, and invasive species are affecting the environment that Alaskans have depended upon for thousands of years."

In November 2005, Wilson's peers turned his letter into a statewide youth petition, and developed a presentation on global warming. AYEА chapter leaders gave the presentation to over 300 science and social studies classrooms in schools throughout Anchorage, the Matanuska Susitna Valley, Fairbanks, Juneau, Prince of Wales Island, Yakutat, Ketchikan, Sitka, Homer, Soldotna, and Kenai. In addition, teens from AYEА's Mt. Edgecumbe chapter traveled to their home villages to meet with youth in over ninety communities. The Spirit of Youth Foundation endorsed the effort at their annual banquet, giving the petition even broader statewide representation.

AYEA garnered 5,000 teen signatures from 105 communities in Alaska by April 2006--- more than 10% of the enrolled high school population, and just under 10% of the entire teen population. From April 25-28, a delegation of teens from Dillingham, St. Michael Village, Anchorage, and Yakutat traveled to Washington, D.C. to meet with the Alaska Delegation and other Congressional leaders on global warming. They presented their petition to Senator Lisa Murkowski, who requested that a group of AYEА members meet with climate change specialists in Fairbanks to bridge the "science and public awareness" divide on the issue.

AYEA teens also worked on the local level to raise awareness on global warming. During the group's *2006 Civics and Conservation Summit*, AYEА teen leaders promoted legislation to create an Alaska Climate Change Impact Commission. Teens lobbied for a youth seat on the commission and met with over twenty legislators to promote other bills supporting the funding of alternative energy projects.

More successes followed. When AYEА teens introduced a Climate Change Resolution at the Alaska Association of Student Governments (AASG) conference, four hundred teens from over twenty communities unanimously adopted the resolution.. AYEА members hope to push this resolution forward during the 2007 Civics and Conservation Summit. At the end of April, a team of AYEА members held a press event with Anchorage Mayor Begich to announce Anchorage initiatives to curb greenhouse gas emissions. AYEА

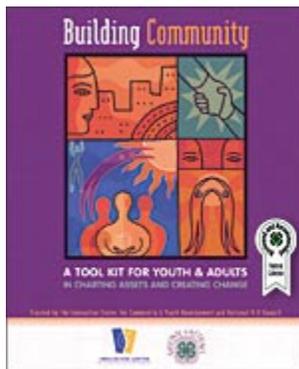
members presented the petition to the Juneau Assembly and asked for a local model of emissions reduction within the next year.

The climate change initiative has spurred dramatic growth at AYEA. The program has engaged 500% more young people in one year with environmental issues, and five times as many youth as it has ever engaged in the history of our program.

“AYEA’s accomplishments are inspiring from the perspectives of both youth development and social justice,” says Wendy Wheeler, president of the Innovation Center. “They exemplify the power of youth leadership in action

Pebbles in the Pond: The Impact of Innovation Center Tool Kits— First in a Series

Amanda Dickerson is active member of the board of a Livingston County, Kentucky non-profit organization called Champions Against Drugs, and has collaborated closely with county extension educator Sheena Thomas-Brown in the development of a county-wide community development initiative. In addition to her responsibilities on the Champions board, Amanda provides training and technical assistance to others in the initiative, and offers presentations to local non-profits to encourage them to join in the project.



She often carries a well-used copy of the Innovation Center’s *Building Community* tool kit in her back pack to school, “for meetings later on” and went out to buy new bookshelves, she says, to hold the other binders and notebooks – the tools of her activism, on her bedroom wall. “I don’t write in the toolkit,” she says, “because other folks might need to use it besides me.” But it’s full of sticky notes, different colors for different pages, marking ideas, quotes and exercises to which she often refers in her work.

Amanda’s work is community change, and at sixteen years old, she already has a deep well of experience to draw from as she moves around the county encouraging the kinds of youth-adult partnerships that she says have made a difference not only in her own life, but in those of her friends and in the life of the community as a whole.

“I would be a different person,” Amanda says, “not as open minded.” This is the case for the adults with whom she works, too. “We use the tool kit to teach them ways to include young people in their work, and they come back shocked at how much the young people know and can do about the problems they’re dealing with.” The tool kit, she says, offers clear, timed activities to facilitate this opening of minds. It’s easy to imagine a room full

of folded arms, and stiff postures – **some** willing to try something new to address the issues of their community, but not quite ready to accept that they could be partners in the endeavor, let alone that such a partnership might be a key factor in the success of their community change efforts.

The toolkit training, Amanda says, offers an easy way in to accepting both of these ideas, and then offers ways to make it happen. The result, she says, is young people who have real experience in leadership, civic engagement, collaboration and problem-solving. Perhaps more importantly though, they learn to articulate their perspective and participate in a way that earns respect from even the most reluctant adult partners. That stronger voice means community change strategies are grounded in real youth experience and perspective, community change that sticks.

Carolyn Edelbeck remembers the first exercise she participated in from the Building Community tool kit. She was in sixth grade in her hometown of Waupaca, Wisconsin, when a teacher approached her to ask if she might be interested in working on a “Healthy Youth/Healthy Community” project in the community. She and others from her middle school, along with adults from the community, first worked with the history wall, then the gridding. “I still remember when we realized why all the kids were hanging out behind the church,” she says, “they were skating! We needed a safe skate park.” Carolyn is now headed into her first year at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and has in the intervening years used that same exercise all over the U.S, in her role as a youth trainer for the Innovation Center. “The exercises in the tool kit can be adapted in so many ways,” she says, “in big cities, rural places, native communities.”

Steve Hennessey agrees. Steve is an Americorps/Vista supervisor for the National Community Service Corps in Missouri. Like Carolyn, Steve is part of the Innovation Center’s “training cadre” of youth and adults who have learned to use the tool kit with community based organizations, schools and non-profit organizations. He and his training partners have brought the tools to both rural and urban communities, over and over again reaffirming the need for youth and adults to work together to address the needs of their communities. “There’s a rural picture and an urban picture,” he says, and though he has worked with about twenty organizations in the use of the Building Community tool kit in both kinds of communities, he is aware of a “much larger crowd” of groups and organizations that have access to the principles of community and youth development through youth adult partnerships. “To do youth adult partnership right,” Steve says, “takes time.” And it takes some convincing. The Toolkit, he says, “offers research-based exercises” to move communities from “working for” or “offering to” to working “with” young people. The day to day impact of this way of working with young people can’t be overstated, he says, even as it is increasingly supported in research in the field.

Kendra Wells works with young people and adults all over the state of Maryland. Like Amanda Dickerson in Kentucky, Carolyn Edelbeck in Wisconsin, and Steve Hennessey in Missouri, she uses the Building Community tool kit as a staple in her work. Her goal in the work, she says is to be a “drop in the pond,” to create a ripple that others notice, and to “keep attracting more and more people to this idea.” The idea is that community

building happens most effectively when youth and adults are engaged together in the effort. Over and over, the toolkit has been a drop in the pond. The ripples are moving beyond the Innovation Center's training cadre, beyond its formal partners in the field, and out into the lives of youth and adults in all kinds of communities in the US and beyond.

Over the next few months, we'll explore some of these lives and some of these communities, from Alaska to Arizona, from Colorado to Kentucky. The stories are compelling, hopeful and instructive. If you have a story of your own, we encourage you to contact us at info@theinnovationcenter.org.

Interview with Zara Snapp

by Katy Otto

Twenty one year old Zara Snapp began working at Mi Casa, a community youth organization in Denver, CO when she was fifteen. This summer she interned with the Innovation Center with support from the Center for Ethical Leadership (www.ethicalleadership.org). We spoke with Zara to learn what inspired her to a career in youth development.

IC: Tell me a bit about you, and your work at Mi Casa.

ZS: I grew up in Mexico and lived there until I was six years old. My dad had a steady job playing trumpet in an orchestra, so we were well off there. My parents separated and I moved with my mom to Texas at six, where we struggled to make ends meet. In my early teens we moved to Denver and I hung out a lot with homeless and runaway youth there. We got kicked out of parks illegally and had other experiences that I thought were unfair. I became interested in theater at this point, probably because I loved being onstage. I thought the organization Mi Casa was great because I could get paid to do theater and do STD and HIV prevention outreach downtown with my friends. I went through an interview process to be a part of that peer education program. I ended up staying at Mi Casa for what seems like forever.

I am now a Youth Coach at Mi Casa with KLCC (Kellogg Leadership for Community Change). It is my job to maintain and facilitate the leadership development of 25 youth and adults to work on community change using collective leadership and youth-adult partnerships. For this work, I use my theater experience. I don't think it comes naturally to people to be extroverted. As the youth coach in Denver, I have to be motivated and have a strong voice. Theater also helped teach me how to hold myself in the world.

How did you discover the Innovation Center?

I first met the Innovation Center as part of KLCC. The Innovation Center is helping Mi Casa and other KLCC grantees to teach young people and adults to work together as partners to improve their communities. I knew I was going to DC for the summer as a Truman Scholar and I thought it would be fun to work with the Innovation Center and continue exploring youth-adult partnerships.

IC: This issue of *Innovate!* is about adding value to our work. What are some ways you've seen this at the Innovation Center?

ZS: Value is added by the personal relationships you build. By building relationships, people can share knowledge. You can share another person's warmth, even the way they smile. It isn't a tangible thing. In KLCC, the Innovation Center is a coach to Mi Casa and other sites. You add value by doing everything you can in a coach role to enhance leadership development. The work involves getting people to go out of their comfort zone and define their own personal boundaries around their ability to lead. A good coach knows the people he or she is working with very well, and can help connect them to the resources they need. On a personal level, a coach challenges people in how they see their role in the world and in helping to push that further.

IC: What are some of the most effective ways you have seen youth involved in organizing and civic engagement?

ZS: I think I got to experience it myself, firsthand. When I was first brought in as a youth staff, I was given responsibility and ownership over projects and meaningful work to do. I didn't just make copies. I had a chance to feel that I was actually making a difference. It was fulfilling. You also have to be really flexible with young people. They need opportunities to experiment with new ideas and work at their own paces. I think that is a really important lesson for nonprofits.

IC: What are some of the most valuable lessons you have learned thus far?

ZS: I've learned three important lessons. First, being connected to the community is really important – whether through site visits, phone calls, etc. – otherwise you forget why you are doing the work. Second, from working with the Innovation Center I've learned the value of intermediary work. Even though sites and activities are very diverse, many of them need the same support. Third, I've learned never to underestimate small victories, no matter what community you are working in.

IC: Tell me about your experiences with KLCC.

ZS: My experiences as a coach have been around youth-adult partnerships. There are a lot of cultural barriers there, and a lot of my work has been around bridging those barriers to involve people in community action. Cultural barriers come up a lot when working with youth and adults. There are very different communication styles. I think an important lesson has been that, while most people have similar goals and ideals, they have different ways of expressing them to each other. Once you create strong

relationships, you are able to listen to and learn from each other. One thing Mi Casa has worked on is creating a sense of personal identity so that both the youth and the adults have clear ideas about how they want to live and how to best contribute to the group. This helps them cross cultural barriers. With the Innovation Center, I have worked to make sure KLCC sites are supported, that they don't feel as if they are being left behind, and that they are confident about where they are in the process.

IC: What is your career plan?

ZS: I want to do work around community mobilization in disempowered parts of the world, and youth are disempowered everywhere. I want to discover the ways in which I can have the greatest impact on marginalized communities and work with them to strengthen their voice in public policy and community development. I don't know where I will end up, but I know that I will continue to be in public service. It is not that I think it is my mission, it's that I can't imagine not doing this work.

Calendar

[Quest for Spirit and Imagination](#)

[National Association of 4-H Extension Agents](#)

Location: Milwaukee, WI

Date: October 22 – October 26, 2006

Join Innovation Center staff and partners for workshops on [evaluation](#) and [civic engagement](#).

[Leadership at the Crossroads](#)

[International Leadership Association](#)

Location: Chicago, IL

Date: November 2 – 5, 2006

Innovation Center President Wendy Wheeler and Dale Nienow, Executive Director of the Center for Ethical Leadership, will share lessons from their work on [collective leadership](#) and [youth-adult partnerships](#) through the Kellogg Leadership for Community Change project.